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## THE AUSTRALIAN CINEMA - AN OVERVIEW

This article has been contributed by the Australian Film Commission.

### **FILM: AN AMBASSADOR**

Australian film and television has been an excellent ambassador for Australia by promoting international awareness of, and interest in, our country. Local film and television programs have stimulated tourism and made a significant contribution to Australia's export earnings. Many Australian films have achieved international acclaim at film festivals around the world, winning prestigious awards and representing Australia at important cultural forums. In the financial year 1987-88, a total of 255 Australian films were successfully submitted to 59 international film festivals, a number of which received awards, including feature films such as **Travelling North**, **High Tide**, **The Tale of Ruby Rose** and **The Umbrella Woman** (also known as **The Good Wife**).

In 1987, 23 Australian-made feature films secured a theatrical release in Australia, while 10 and 8 features were released in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively. The major theatrical success of both 1986 and 1987 was **Crocodile Dundee**, which surpassed all other films at the box office both nationally and internationally. **Crocodile Dundee** was the most successful film ever released in Australia and it ranks as one of the most successful films in world-wide cinema history. **Crocodile Dundee 11** released in 1988, enjoyed one of the largest-attended cinema openings ever recorded in the United States, while creating an opening-day record in the United Kingdom.

In Australia, the film's release surpassed all previous Australian box office openers - including the forerunner **Crocodile Dundee** and other success stories such as **Star Wars** and **ET**.

**Crocodile Dundee** and **Crocodile Dundee 11** have not been the only Australian films to achieve critical and financial success both at home and overseas. **Rikki and Pete**, **High Tide**, **The Man from Snowy River II** and **The Lighthorsemen** have secured theatrical releases and acclaim around the world. In addition to success on the mainstream feature film circuit, several Australian documentary films received impressive theatrical release in 1988 - in particular **Cane Toads: An Unnatural History**, **South of the Border** and **Cannibal Tours**.

Australian films made for television, notably mini-series and drama serials, are in high demand overseas. Television channels in the United Kingdom, for example, regularly screen the television serials **Home and Away**, **The Flying Doctors**, **Richmond Hill** and **Neighbours**. **Neighbours** has become one of the top rating shows on United Kingdom television, rating consistently as one

of the Top 10 programs. In all, 15 Australian feature films and 12 mini-series were screened on United Kingdom television in 1987. In 1988 viewers saw the telemovie **The First Kangaroos** (an Anglo-Australian co-production), and mini-series **My Brother Tom**, **Land of Hope** and **Winners**.

British cable and satellite services also screened a wide range of programs, including 18 Australian feature films broadcast as special programs in 1988. Meanwhile European satellite services are also broadening the reach of Australian film and television programs. Drama series and serials are especially popular in Europe. For example, the series **Sons and Daughters** has been broadcast across Europe and in the Bahamas, Egypt, Trinidad and Ireland.

On United States cable television an average of 2 Australian feature films are broadcast weekly. There is a preferred demand for feature films and telemovies for television broadcasting, however the mini-series **The Last Frontier** rated impressively when shown and the documentary **Suzi's Story** was extremely well received. In 1988 an 18 week special series of Australian telemovies called **Australian Movie This Week** screened on WYNC to good reviews, as well as the **Mother and Son** comedy series.

## EARLY DAYS

The first decades of the twentieth century saw a flourishing period of feature film production in Australia. Film makers were involved as early as 1886 in making documentaries of daily life, producing combination film and slide shows, and creating background films for stage plays. The highlight of this period was **The Story of the Kelly Gang** made in 1906 and believed to be the first feature-length film to be made in the world.

The 'Silent Era' of the Australian film industry, circa 1907-1928. produced well over 150 feature films. By 1929 a combination of forces - the introduction of sound films from overseas, an increasing stranglehold on the local market by American and British distributors, and the economic devastation caused by the Depression - signalled a serious downturn in Australian film production from which it would take decades to recover.

The transition to sound motion picture technology in the early 1930s was costly and difficult. However, a few directors adapted to the new technology and produced commercially successful films dealing with Australian subjects, often located in the Australian bush.

During the war years, feature film production dropped off as film makers became preoccupied with producing newsreels and documentaries which screened in the large number of cinemas. Whilst film production was down, attendances reached an all time peak in 1944-45, with 151 million admissions that year.

Local feature film production in the post-war period was marked by an influx of British and American film companies attracted to Australia by its exotic locations, resulting in productions such as the Ealing Studio's **The Overlanders**, Stanley Kramer's **On the Beach** and Fred Zinnemann's **The Sundowners**.

But there were few indigenous films being made, with the notable exception of Charles Chauvel's feature film **Jedda**, which was the first Australian-made colour feature film. **Jedda's** theme was also uniquely Australian - it explored the issue of Aboriginal and white relations.

With theatrical production and distribution dominated by foreign companies, a whole generation of Australians were growing up and going to the movies but possibly never seeing an Australian film.

## A RENAISSANCE

Then in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period characterised by social change, political protest and cultural re-examination, an underground film culture began to develop, based primarily in Melbourne and Sydney. This time of questioning and change created an environment conducive to lobbying the government to stimulate a national film industry and provide the requested financial support. Australia's cultural heritage was under question and a film industry was promoted as an essential vehicle for a necessary cultural and national exploration of that heritage.

The government accepted the cultural arguments and, with its assistance, the film 'renaissance' began.

At first, films that emerged were primarily engaged in exploring facets of Australian humour, resulting in such films as **Stork**, **The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie**, and **Alvin Purple**. These films were financially successful both in Australia and overseas for there was a familiarity about the 'ocker' character which audiences found endearing. However, some audiences found this essential rawness embarrassing and wanted a more refined and sophisticated Australia to be reflected in its cinema.

Films such as **Sunday Too Far Away** and **Picnic at Hanging Rock** met with those requirements for a quality cinema rooted in the intrinsic 'Australian' experience and local literary traditions. The unique Australian landscape, good quality film production values and a stylised narrative simplicity became symbols of the Australian cinema, combining to capture the imagination of local and international audiences alike and generating pride in these filmic explorations of the Australian identity.

Documentary film making also attracted similar attention in the late 1970s as film makers expanded their range of subject matter toward more socio-politically oriented films covering such issues as Aborigines, feminism, the environment, Asian, Pacific and Latin American politics, and communism.

## GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

Towards the end of the decade, escalating production costs and the film industry's desire to consolidate the economic bases for production were prime factors in the Federal Government's introduction of a tax incentive scheme aimed at enhancing private investment in film. This scheme, known as Division 10BA of the **Income Tax Assessment Act 1936** was introduced in June 1981 to encourage private investment (via a tax deduction incentive) in feature films, documentaries, telemovies and television mini-series.

Investors could write off up to 150 per cent of capital expenditure on an acceptable project and be tax exempt for up to 50 per cent of net earnings from that investment.

The films produced in the first few years of the tax incentive scheme introduced the work of some of Australia's most respected film makers to the world, such as Bruce Beresford (**Puberty Blues**), Gillian Armstrong (**Starstruck**), George Miller (**Mad Max**) and Peter Weir (**The Year of Living Dangerously**).

Whilst historical-drama and literary adaptations remained popular film themes, film makers began to tackle more contemporary issues such as adolescence in **Puberty Blues**, new wave music in **Starstruck**, Asian politics in **Far East** and **The Year of Living Dangerously**, environmental issues in **Heatwave** and **The Killing of Angel Street**, socio-ethnic problems in **Moving Out** and the drug culture in **Monkey Grip** and **Winter of our Dreams**.

The films of the early 1980s continued the success stories of the 1970s and were acclaimed overseas by becoming box office hits. Films from this period include **Breaker Morant**, **Mad Max 2**, **Gallipoli**, **The Man from Snowy River** and **Phar Lap**.

At this time film makers began to explore the dramatic possibilities of television mini-series. The national and intentional success of the mini-series **A Town Like Alice** in 1980 stimulated television network demand, and in the next two years, no less than ten mini-series were produced.

Initially, historical themes predominated ranging from the portrayal of life in the penal colonies in **For the Term of His Natural Life**, **Sara Dane** and **Under Capricorn**, bushranging in **The Last Outlaw**, the pioneering spirit in **All the Rivers Run**, the rise of nationalism in **Eureka Stockade**, treatment of Aborigines in **Women of the Sun**, and industrial unrest in the 1920s in **The Waterfront**.

Funding for short drama, documentaries and experimental works, provided primarily through the Australian Film Commission, also created opportunities for upcoming directors to explore innovative ideas and techniques in film and to acquire practical film making skills. Many resulting films were adventurous and inventive, drawing upon European and American film models for their cinematic modes, then remodelling to reflect Australian cultural and social moods and trends. Some of today's best-known feature film directors, such as Peter Weir and Gillian Armstrong, made documentaries and short dramas during this period.

However, it became evident in 1983 that Australian film production was facing some serious problems as well as substantial cost increases which threatened the underlying economics of film production despite the generous film tax incentive scheme. Australian cinema, originally stimulated by the desire for cultural and social exploration through film, was becoming an industry predominantly predicated upon business concerns.

That year the government, responsive to these problems, and concerned with the overall quality of production and the influx of speculative promoters, introduced legislative amendments which reduced the allowable tax deduction under 10BA from 150 per cent to 130 per cent with a corresponding 33 per cent tax exemption on net returns from the investment. In addition a special fund of \$5,000,000 was allocated to the Australian Film Commission. The fund, called 'The Special Production Fund', was designed to encourage production of high quality film and television drama and documentaries which carried the potential for commercial success.

## THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

By 1983, the nature of the Australian film industry had begun to change. The heavy reliance by producers on direct government investment was being replaced by private investors who were seeking viable investment properties, for the financial market had started to drive production. Investors were interested in recouping their investment and fulfilling the film's potential for profit.

Producers were obliged to guarantee investors some revenue and in order to do that they had to sell distribution rights prior to the film or television project being made. In order to attract the sort of money required, producers had to look toward the United States and Europe for distribution deals.

As a result of this, in 1984 and 1985, there emerged an increasing reliance on a number of international distributors who were able to pay up-front advances for a program. These advances comprised the bulk of the film's overall budget.

With such a dependence on the international market, there was an inherent tension between the objectives of developing an Australian cinema and the need to meet the supply needs of distributors.

For many producers this posed a challenge: how to make films which had an Australian

character and flavour, but which also appealed to an international audience, beyond the historical-drama genre which had already proved so popular.

Film makers rose to this challenge by developing diverse styles and narratives as they explored different genres of film making and new presentations of the Australian character, landscape and mythologies. This diversity was reflected in such films as **Australian Dream**, **Emoh Ruo** - comedies, **A Street to Die**, **Fran**, **A Test of Love** - quasi-documentaries, **Empty Beach**, **Fair Game**, **Mad Max**; **Beyond Thunderdome** - action dramas, **Cactus** and **The More Things Change** - human relationship films.

With this increasing pressure to work primarily within a business context, to make largely entertaining and commercially successful films, some critics felt that a certain integrity and commitment to the art of film making had been lost. Film makers were being asked to be up-front businessmen and women, to divert energies away from the creative process into the entrepreneurial and to make creative compromises in order to satisfy purely commercial demands.

In a creative context, this was undoubtedly true. On the other hand, Australia could not afford to sustain its film and television output from domestic box office receipts and television sales alone.

Revenue had to be obtained from overseas, and it was clear that in the business context, Australian programs were capable of obtaining wide international distribution.

In November 1985 a co-production scheme was introduced to assist local producers in collaborating with foreign partners on officially approved co-ventures while still receiving the benefits of the 10BA tax incentive scheme. Administered by the Australian Film Commission, arrangements have been made with CNC in France, the BBC and Channel Four in the United Kingdom, the New Zealand Film Commission, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in the United States.

## GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

By mid 1985 it had again become clear that the tax incentive scheme was pushing producers to obtain extremely high pre-sales and that the costs associated with attracting film investment were rising significantly. There was an increasing uncertainty about the level of available finance when the 10B tax deduction/exemption was further reduced to 120/20 per cent. The industry's financial base was shaky.

It was at this time that the Australian Film Commission proposed the creation of an independent Australian Film Finance Corporation to replace the 10BA tax concessions. The proposed Corporation would operate like a bank and loans would be secured against the rights of the program or against sales agreements already in place. In 1988, the Federal Government established the Australian Film Finance Corporation with a first year funding of \$70 million, while further reducing 10BA tax concession to a 100 per cent deduction with all returns from the investment being treated as taxable income.

In addition to the Film Finance Corporation, other Commonwealth and State funded government organisations play an important role in providing financial assistance for the development of an indigenous film culture.

The Australian Film Commission is the Commonwealth statutory film authority established in 1975. The Australian Film Commission's principal functions are to provide development funding and equity investment for film and television, encourage innovative and experimental film making, provide support and advice to developing film makers, assist in the marketing, distribution, exhibition and broadcasting of Australian programs, provide a central information resource.

advise government on film matters and monitor developments in the industry.

Independent film bodies also operate in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia and are funded by the respective State governments. These bodies contribute toward encouraging local film making by providing marketing and production expertise and liaising with government on film policy.

With the establishment of the Australian Film Finance Corporation there is now a new financial climate for production in Australia, with an optimism and invigorated energy in the industry.

Australia can enter the 1990s with the knowledge that audiences the world over have a window into the country that reveals a sophisticated and culturally mature society - something that is possible in large part because of the vision, creative energy and expertise of the Australian film and television industry.

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